Personal Narrative Essay

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Abstract

This narrative explores the personal, professional, and academic development of information technology and cybersecurity students at Old Dominion University. This paper will discuss experiences from working at the IT Help Desk in Monarch Hall at ODU, the reasons for pursuing a career in cybersecurity and the support that was experienced from peers via Developing Men of Color (DMC) and the role of technical writing and rigorous coursework in preparing the student for a future in Government Technology (GovTech) as a Risk Management Framework (RMF) expert. Concepts of personal narratives (McAdams, 2001), ownership (Nguyen, 2020) and support (Wood, 2017) will be used.

Intrduction

There are also times in life when events will happen that you did not anticipate but also times when you can gain a greater insight about yourself. I started at Old Dominion University (ODU) in Norfolk, Virginia as a freshman at a public research university and walked into Monarch Hall for the first time. I did not at that time fully grasp the impact that this school would have on my IT career. The IT help desk can appear to be a location where individuals go to get help with issues such as Wi-Fi or passwords. For me, however, the help desk was much more than this. It allowed for my technical and IT knowledge and skills gained in school to interact with actual human and technology induced issues. Simply sitting at the help desk with a headset allowed that interaction to happen.

Reflecting on all my experiences within school, community, and my work in this ePortfolio has been important to me as I create this for my public ePortfolio. According to McAdams, stories allow individuals to create meaning and provide direction to their lives by tying past, present and future experiences together (McAdams, 2001). Furthermore, theories on self-determination demonstrate that individuals can take initiative in their actions and actively help direct their life course rather than being a passive recipient of life events (Nguyen, 2020). Finally, the concept of learning in the community demonstrates that identity can be fostered through mentors, friendships, and support from others (Wood, 2017). Within my experiences I have utilized the busy call at the ODU IT Help Desk, taken difficult courses within cybersecurity and contributed to my community through Developing Men of Color (DMC). Through these experiences I have been able to make connections between my actions, external support, academics, and work. All of these have allowed me to develop a stronger understanding of myself and my desired direction in life.

Life at the ODU IT Help Desk

I started at Monarch Hall in September as a member of the ODU IT Help Desk. The position has challenged my technical aptitude, patience, and stress management abilities. The IT Help Desk plays a vital role on campus as it provides IT support to many faculty, staff, and students. I have dealt with both phone and walk in users and have encountered a wide variety of technical issues. Some issues have been relatively easy to resolve while some have been more complex and have taken more time and troubleshooting to complete. All of these have given me additional experience with technology and have improved my stress management, patience, and confidence levels.

My first week in the IT Help Desk I remember hearing the phones constantly ring and the stress of other students ringing up needing help for some critical assignment. I observed both in phone and walk in service the value of communication with a stressed or frustrated individual. (Amissah, 2026) Troubleshooting computers is more than knowledge of computer systems. It also involves patience, empathy, and active listening. When students call under stress, these factors are very important. For instance, a student has a laptop that suddenly fails the night before a 12 am deadline. This student needs more than a computer fix. They also need someone to remain calm, be able to explain the issue at hand, and provide comfort that efforts are being made to help the student.

I began to see the links between IT support and organizational security through this experience. Requests for network access, MFA issues, password resets, etc. seemed very mundane but were in actuality very relevant. Every request is also allowed for security within the university's systems while providing a user's needs. I began to see IT support as more than just computer issue resolution. IT support can also play a role in avoiding security issues and information protection. These experiences allowed for a practical view of security. They also allowed for relating classroom security concepts to practical situations and daily impacts of security.

Choosing Cybersecurity and Academic Work

All students have a pivot point in their career. This is the moment that you make a decision to choose a certain direction and go that way. For me, this pivot point started when I became interested in technology and the workings of technology. I then began to naturally begin becoming involved in technology support because I focused on learning the workings of technology and solving problems. I then became interested in information security. I became interested in the attacks on computer systems, the vulnerabilities of such systems, and the defenses that can be used to secure these systems. From that interest, I then decided to major in information security because it incorporates technology, security, and problem solving.

Cybersecurity has been a subject of personal interest to me. Nguyen (2020) states that identity is formed through the decisions one makes and the ownership of one's own future rather than by conforming to others. My interest in cybersecurity arose from the understanding that errors made by individuals and social engineering attacks can impact upon access to the digital world. At the beginning of my studies at ODU, I was introduced to risk, network security, identity and access management and risk. I soon came to see identity and access management as an integral component of cybersecurity. Identity and access management can be described as a system that ensures that correct users at the correct time can access correct resources and data.

I worked at a help desk part time while pursuing my classes. I started noticing the relationship between material taught in school and applications found in the workplace. When a student would try to gain access to data that they were not authorized to access or hack into an account, I wasn't simply resetting a password. I was actually applying for the information learned in class regarding security. McAdams (2001) states that individuals form an identity through the relationship between

their experiences and their values and goals. I found that studying information security and applying it to the help desk issues that I encountered allowed me to find a passion for information security and a future in that field.

Uplifting the Community: Developing Men of Color

Leadership is also a result of extracurricular experiences. As a member of Developing Men of Color (DMC), a student group at our school, I have further developed an understanding of leadership. DMC is a group that focuses on the development of students of color. DMC strives to ensure that color students are academically successful and ready for the workplace. DMC hosts networking events, peer mentorship, and workshops to aid in the development of students. These events provided me with the chance to develop as a leader, build relationships, and develop as an individual.

Wood (2017) points out the value of community and collaborative learning in professional development. DMC meetings provided me with an opportunity to escape from the potentially isolated experience of pursuing challenging STEM disciplines. These meetings allowed young men of diverse backgrounds the opportunity to discuss experiences navigating primarily white educational and corporate institutions, receive interview and resume practice, and discuss support and challenges inherent in such experiences. Within this community I was also able to serve as a mentor to students of color as they gained confidence and began to prepare for entry level and internship opportunities in the tech industry.

I have learned that technical expertise is not the only skill required in computing. Effective leadership involves creating opportunities for others to develop their skills, closing opportunity gaps, and providing opportunities for individuals from a variety of backgrounds to achieve success

in computing. The people skills I gained from dealing with dissatisfied customers in the IT help desk have also contributed to my ability to assist my colleagues in DMC. I have found that technical and people skills can be complementary.

The Future as an RMF Specialist in GovTech

My future career objective is Government Technology (GovTech) as a Risk Management Framework (RMF) practitioner. Managing risk within government IT systems requires policy knowledge, risk identification, management, and strong technical writing skills. Cybersecurity involves a great deal of writing that is often overlooked. Working RMF I will be creating security documentation, interpreting system security plans (SSPs), and communicating security risks to auditors, government entities and non-technical users. The technical writing that I am developing at ODU will allow for incident reporting, security control communication and policy creation, all of which are extremely valuable in this future role as they will aid in effective communication and decision making.

Conclusion

I look back on my progression from busy support lines at Monarch Hall to graduate level cybersecurity and back to community service and recognize the impact each role has had on my development. McAdams (2001) describes a life narrative as the bridge between past experiences and future aspirations. Each interaction I had while mentoring with Developing Men of Color, each security principle I acquired, each problem I managed on a support line, helped me in my development. I learned to support people, manage problems, and remain calm under pressure. I also discovered a role for myself. I hope to contribute to Government Technology as an RMF expert while providing security to critical systems and opportunities for technologists of all colors.

References

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